

VIOLENCE AND THE WEIGHT OF “OR” IN BLOOD  
MERIDIAN

by  
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A THESIS

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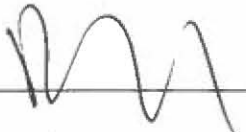
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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Professor Forest Pyle

In this thesis, I demonstrate how moments of “or” persist throughout Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, and argue that these moments encourage a way of reading and understanding the novel from a suspended mental state of “unknowing.” I analyze moments of “or” in specific narrative instances, and show how they manifest in diverse ways: through sublime similes, horrifyingly real violence, and ambiguous dialogue. Next, I contemplate the “or” as a quality transcending the story of the narrative and functioning at the structural levels of narration and form of the novel. Finally, I discuss the bizarrely detached nature of the novel’s violence as an “or” in itself that urges us to reflect upon the historical telling of Western Expansion and our own reactions to the events we witness. Ultimately, the sense of “unknowing” fostered by the weight of “or” in *Blood Meridian* allows for a revolutionary new way of reading and understanding this highly controversial and much debated text.

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## Introduction

Over the course of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, Jon Glanton and his band of scalp-hunters journey along the Texas-Mexico border seeking out the Apaches, Comanche, and Yuma, whom they have been paid to kill by various parties. In the midst of this quest, they "fall upon a band of peaceful Tiguas on the river and slaughter them every soul" (180). After this bleak announcement, the narrator backtracks to represent in more detail the violence the gang commits against these people. The following comment of a gang member highlights the injustice of their actions: "Them sons of bitches aint botherin nobody" (181). Despite this recognition of the people's amicable disposition, the gang "rides on" toward the camp. Two succinct paragraphs depict the attack of Glanton's gang on the Tiguas, who are "shot down," "trampled, and "bludgeoned" to death. In the next paragraph, the narrator grows strangely distant from the main character, "the kid," whom the narrator typically shadows. The narrator is therefore able to record the reaction of some Tigua women returning to their destroyed homes and families after a day of fishing upstream. Following what has just been a matter-of-fact relay of violent actions, the tone and expression of the narrator dramatically shifts to that of the following passage:

An old woman knelt at the blackened stones before her door and poked brush into the coals and blew back a flame from the ashes and began to right the overturned pots. All about her the dead lay with their peeled skulls **like** polyps bluely wet **or** luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon. (181-82, my emphasis)

Suddenly, after a scene of explicit and unrelenting violence, the text offers a reprieve allowed by the seemingly inconsequential words "like" and "or." These two small words signal what I call a moment of "or," meaning they provide alternate ways of

perceiving one scene. By means of the “like” and the “or,” this passage presents three distinct images of one scene of violence and therefore (at least) three different modes of understanding and experiencing the violence as a reader. The three images in this passage transition from more to less grounded in material reality, and from less to more sublime, effectively turning our worlds upside down in terms of how to perceive and react to this moment.

The first of these images is the “the dead lay[ing] with their peeled skulls,” which presents a literal vision of the scene. Next, the narrator provides another way of understanding this instance, describing the skulls “like polyps bluely wet.” On its own, this image is pleasant, even compelling, but the connection between the wetness of the polyps to the blood of recently dead people complicates both the normally benign image of sea anemones, and the usually atrocious image of scalped and slaughtered human beings. This space of suspended expectations intensifies with the final image in this excerpt, which is the strangest of the three: “luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon.” The third of these images, due to the melodic consonance of the “M” sound in the line, inversely creates the highest degree of cognitive dissonance with the slaughter being described. In other words, the reader must grapple with the transformation of their patterned beliefs surrounding both aesthetic language and also brutal violence, therefore witnessing their own minds as they actively form new reactions to this hybrid moment.

It is the element of the “or” in *Blood Meridian* that prevents it from being what some critics have accused: gratuitously and unethically violent. While the violence in *Blood Meridian* certainly disturbs and at times entertains the reader, it is worth more

than simply well-written words and shock value. The necessity for violence to have occurred in order for the reader to enjoy this and other pleasing formulations of words in the novel looms ominously throughout the text, creating an ethical dilemma with which any reader must contend. This novel unsettles our most solid assumptions about typically oppositional terms. It also urges us to contemplate the complex relationships between violence in its variant forms and our role as witness through both writing and reading.

Throughout Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, moments of "or" manifest in various forms, including specific lines and passages within the text, the perspective of the narrator, the formatting and structure of the novel itself and the very title of the entire enterprise. It is the seemingly inconsequential conjunction "or" and its various functions within *Blood Meridian* that I address in this thesis. The weight, or significance, or importance of "or" begins before the narrative does, with a title that foreshadows what will be a text full of options, alternatives, and varied perspectives. The first half of the title is, "Blood Meridian." "Blood" is the visible, tangible result of physical violence, and "Meridian" alludes to geographical lines along the earth as well as great prosperity or high flows of energy, therefore the first half of the title implies violence in abundance, and is grounded in physical reality. "The Evening Redness in the West," on the other hand, evokes the lovely image of a sunset. Just as the intertwining of benign, beautiful, and violent images in the "polyps bluely wet" passage above complicates the possibilities of all three, so do the alternately violent and lovely images offered in the novel's title. The title becomes infinitely more



interesting by the tiny conjunction “or,” because it blocks the normally reliable assumption that the adjectives “violent” and “lovely” are mutually exclusive.

While many critics fail to acknowledge the second, softer half of the novel’s title, one critic, Peter Josyph, not only recognizes it, but also critiques the shortening of the title by other McCarthy scholars, even if it is for the sake of brevity. While I appreciate this sentiment, I will spare my readers from having to repeatedly read the lengthy title of the novel in my thesis and hope that my mention of the importance of the full title in the introduction is sufficient. In his continued defense of the title of *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, Josyph asks, “Is it of no significance that this novel, which was written with an authority seldom seen in American letters, has an act of indecision built into its title?” (6). My answer is that the indecision of the “or” in the title is indeed of tremendous significance, as is the authority of the indecisiveness. In this thesis I seek to defend this answer by explaining how the seemingly negligible conjunction “or” facilitates an active experience of ethical exploration and self-reflection for the reader of *Blood Meridian*.

Ironically, the function of “or” in *Blood Meridian* makes relevant the work of a very different kind of scholarship than is usually seen in analyzing the text: the scholarship of Lalitha Vasudevan, who studies theories of literacy in education (among other topics). Made even more ironic by the antagonist character of the judge’s obsession with “knowing” throughout the entire novel, it is Vasudevan’s concept of “unknowing” that aptly describes how moments of “or” function within the text. Vasudevan developed her article, “An Invitation to Unknowing,” at Columbia University in a year-long faculty seminar that included faculty from a variety of fields

and areas of research focus. This diverse group of scholars met to “examine in fresh terms the nexus of globalization, education, and citizenship” (1). The inclusion of diverse areas of scholarship and the vocabulary of “nexus” relate to how the “or” breaks down apparent barriers between usually separate categories and encourages the consideration of them together. Vasudevan defines “unknowing” as:

an act of dwelling in the imaginative space between declarative acts of knowing and not knowing; an invitation to wrest our modes of inquiry and our beings away from the clutches of finite definitions of knowledge and instead rest our endeavors in the beauty of myriad ways of knowing. (1168)

In this definition of unknowing, Vasudevan challenges the Western notions of knowing as the goal of education and of “unknowing” as failure. To her, knowing is something dangerous that can grip one in its clutches, whereas “unknowing” has a quality of beauty. In the novel, one of the judge’s roles is to embody the act of knowing. A particular moment that exemplifies the judge’s brand of learning is when he discovers ancient cave drawings and traces a select few into his book, leaves countless others untraced, and erases one without copying it first (180). This is an example of how through his gathering of knowledge, the judge records an incomplete story and contributes to the erasure of historical truths. It is ironic and humorous, then, to consider that despite the judge’s ostensible authority throughout the text, the reading of this novel encourages and requires “unknowing,” possibly suggesting it as a way of thinking not only within the world of the narrative, but also in the real world.

By analyzing *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West* through the lens of “unknowing,” I hope to uncover how these discordant readings of violence in the novel are not only possible, but integral to the experience of reading and thinking

about the text. In **Chapter One** I will locate specific places within the narrative where moments of “or” occur and explore both the shared and different functions of these moments in the text. **Chapter Two** will widen, and even invert, the analytical lens to demonstrate how moments of “or” not only persist throughout the narrative, but beyond it through qualities such as the form and structure of the novel and the narrator’s perspective. In **Chapter Three**, having established a solid groundwork for moments of “or” and how they function in the novel, I will grapple with subsequent ethical questions. I will argue that despite critical complaints of the violence being gratuitous or nihilistic, that the violence is actually an “or” itself and can be read through varying lenses, ultimately espousing “unknowing” as the ethical way of being.

## Chapter 1: Magnifying Moments of “Or” Within the Narrative

### Contextualizing the Narrative

Published in 1985, *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West* is Cormac McCarthy’s fifth of ten novels. It begins with the brief life story of a nameless child who is motherless, illiterate, unwashed, and has brooding within him “a taste for mindless violence” (1). At fourteen the child leaves his home in Tennessee and is thereafter referred to as “the kid,” until the very last chapter in which he becomes “the man.” The novel traces the life of the kid as he joins Jon Glanton’s gang in its seemingly amoral journey across the American West. The gang trades in the scalps of any person they encounter with dark-enough hair to pass for Indian, regardless of their age, gender, or disposition. Along this quest, Judge Holden, who is mostly referred to as “the judge,” opposes the kid in an ongoing battle of wills, the differences of which are hinted at but never fully articulated to the reader. The ambiguity of this struggle between the kid and the judge is yet another manifestation of the weight of “or” in the novel. Even though distinct instances of action transpire, the novel lacks a sense of forward motion and of resolution. This deficit is emphasized by the disappearance and assumed murder of the kid just before the conclusion of the novel and by the final scene (excluding the epilogue) in which the judge dances naked and chants that he will live forever.

*Blood Meridian* does not abide by the formulaic plot line of rising action, climax, and resolution; rather, the plot consists of a stable baseline of wandering through a barren desert, regularly punctuated by a series of isolated events and

occasionally interrupted by moments that transcend the world of the narrative. One of these transcendent moments occurs when a vampire bat attacks the kid's acquaintance, Sproule, causing him to respond with "a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world" (69). The poetry of this line, and of other similarly aesthetic moments, seems like a caesura in the otherwise bloody pulsebeat of the narrative. This passage provides useful imagery in thinking about the plotline of the novel itself: a stable heart rate projected on a screen, occasionally interrupted by mysterious breaks in the line.

Beyond the literal plot, *Blood Meridian* paints a grotesque picture of Western expansion that avoids glorifying or demonizing the movement west, or those who participated. The novel shows rather than tells this story through the narrator's exclusion of the reader from character interiority. Without this interiority, we are guided through an apparently visual experience in which we witness descriptions of landscape, actions that are often violent in nature, moments of aestheticism, and the reactions of our own minds to this strange conglomeration of typically independent categories. Of all of these elements of *Blood Meridian*'s plot and style, nothing is more significant to me than the function of the "or."

### **Synergy through Similes**

Varying degrees of "or" exist within *Blood Meridian*, the simplest of which are basic similes. Because most, if not all, authors use similes in their writing, the presence of them alone does not distinguish this novel and style of writing from others (although similes do abound in this novel). The plethora of similes in this text matter because the shortest of them hints toward and builds up to the longer moments of "or" both within

and beyond the narrative that are integral to an ethical reading of the text. In this chapter I aim to ground my argument in textual instances of “or” within the narrative, starting with shorter similes and building up to longer passages of “or.”

The similes in this novel create moments of “or” due to three of their qualities. The first is that similes inherently contain at least three images: one is the detail being described, the second is the detail doing the describing or comparing, and the third is the overlay of the two together. Similes can contain more than three images if the original detail is compared to two or more other details, or if the reader has a spectrum of imaginary responses to one comparison. This ability of similes to produce an image greater than the two details on their own is what I mean by the “synergy of similes.” Following the escape of the kid and his new acquaintance from the pop-up church tent, in which the judge has instigated a violent uproar, the text demonstrates this multifarious quality of similes. The kid and his friend look back at the tent and see it begin “to sway and buckle and like a huge and wounded medusa ... trailing tattered canvas walls and ratty guyropes over the ground” (7). This simile contains within it the image of a church-tent collapsing, the image of a mythological creature flailing to her death and the superimposition of these two images upon one another: a tent collapsing in a medusa-like way.

The second quality of “unknowing” in these similes, which builds upon the first quality, is that they blur the line between reality and fantasy within the world of the narrative. In other words, similes naturally offer multiple and simultaneous perspectives of one narrative moment. In the case of the Medusa-like tent simile, the invocation of a mythological creature in connection to a collapsing church tent disrupts

the reality of the narrative and calls into question the role that fantasy plays in this parallel world. These first two qualities characterize virtually any simile. It is the third that distinguishes McCarthy's similes from the norm.

The third quality contributing to moments of "or" is difficult to describe because it appears in multiple forms. While this third quality can appear differently on the surface, it always alludes to possible forces beyond human will, including: religion, good and evil, nihilism, or even the beauty of words. The resistance of this text to supporting only one of these forces has led some critics to read it as nihilistic, when nihilism is only one of many views validated in this novel. The various ways these similes transcend the boundaries of "normal" similes exemplifies again how this novel suspends the reader in a space of "unknowing." Not only does the Medusa-like tent simile offer (at least) three different images through which the mind will inevitably flick, but it alludes to a force, or forces, beyond human will. The image of a church collapsing carries with it a certain philosophical, even nihilistic import, whereas the allusion to Medusa suggests ancient mystery. The yoking of these two images through simile adds yet another mysterious dimension of perception. Rather than elaborating on why the text alludes to Medusa or what it means that this church collapses, the narrator proceeds to describe the next scene. The Medusa simile is not an exception in its mysterious reference to larger, beyond human forces, but is actually the rule when it comes to similes lengthy and succinct in *Blood Meridian*. Before delving into analysis of a few of the key extended similes in the novel, I will review a few more brief similes that demonstrate the range of beyond-human forces referenced in the novel.

Philosophical, religious, and mythical allusions permeate the narrative in a variety of ways, seeming alternately mocking, genuine, and a range of adjectives in between. The similes occur throughout the novel somewhat like waves in the ocean; steadily and with predictable frequency. At times the biblical allusions are ironic. This occurs, for example, when the kid “wade[s] out into the river like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate” (27). At others, these similes relay the simplest of activities, as when the kid and Sproule drink from a stream of water in the middle of the desert and the narrator comments, “they leaned by turns with pursed lips to the stone like devouts at a shrine” (60). Similes using biblical allusions sometimes come across as humorous, such as when one of Captain White’s soldiers praises the Captain by saying “he came along and raised me up like Lazarus” (32). This is funny, because the Captain seems like anything but a Jesus-like figure. Though there are many biblical allusions, the religious and spiritual similes in the novel extend beyond Christianity, which happens in the Medusa-like tent simile above, as well as in the simile when travelers grasping onto their tent in heavy wind are described “like supplicants at the skirts of some wild and irate goddess” (95). Clues of a higher power veer away from religion to something more secular in certain moments, including when the narrator describes people looking “[l]ike puppets in a gallery,” and a wolf as being “hung like a marionette from the moon with his long mouth gibbering” (103, 123). The allusion to any higher power would clash with the stark and emotionally-distant narration, but the allusion to multiple and discordant higher powers creates a space of “unknowing.”

Sometimes, the higher power alluded to in these similes is not as obvious as a god or a puppeteer, but instead appears as some force of darkness or aestheticism. One



example of this more elusive sort of simile occurs in this description of the Glanton gang traversing in the desert: “The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they’d ridden like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come” (45). The imagery of this line is poetic and the assertion of a “darkness yet to come” implies a prophetic power in the narrator. Another entrancing, poetic moment of “or” that is tinged with darkness follows the death of some of the men from illness: “The survivors lay quietly in that cratered void and watched the white hot stars go rifling down the dark. Or slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night” (46). Here, a moment of “or” is quite literally signaled by the capital “Or” beginning the second sentence. The second sentence references the planet Anareta, known as the destroyer of life in astrology, therefore hinting again at a dark, mysterious force. These examples are but a small sample of the short similes imbued with conflicting philosophical, religious, and mythical import that persist throughout the novel, serving as one of the ways the reader of *Blood Meridian* is constantly urged to “unknow.” Having established a baseline for how the typical flow of similes throughout the novel functions, I will now consider the moments of “or” with greater magnitude. The way in which the earlier noted “polyps bluely wet” passage complicates all details used in the simile serves as a model for how other moments of “or” function, though each of them has distinctive characteristics.

## **Martyr Mules**

The first moment I will focus on is when Glanton's gang happens upon a band of muleteers and forces them from the Cliffside path they share. Tension builds as the narrator describes the large number of muleteers inching down the sheer rock face. The first act of violence occurs when Glanton pushes past the last muleteer in the line, "shouldering the drover's mule dangerously among the loose shales" (203). Next, the drover's face clouds and he draws an "escopeta," or shotgun. Brown reacts by shooting the drover twice before, without "hardly turn[ing] to advise themselves of what had occurred," the other gang members start shooting down the rest of the muleteers (203). As the violence increases, so does the language of "or." What begins as an act of physical violence transforms into a vehicle for aesthetic experience. The first sign of this moment's movement toward aestheticism occurs when "the laden packmules [begin] to clamber white-eyed at the sheer wall of the bluff like enormous rats" (203). While the likening of mules to gigantic rodents is not particularly aesthetic, it signals a transition away from literal description to imaginative metaphor and simile. As if the rat simile were a springboard, it launches us into the next sentence, which is a full blown moment of "or":

The riders pushed between them and the rock and methodically rode them from the escarpment, the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver as the flasks broke open and the mercury loomed wobbling in the air in great sheets and lobes and small trembling satellites and all its forms grouping below and racing in the stone arroyos like the imbreachment of some ultimate alchemic work decocted from out the secret dark of the earth's heart, the fleeing stag of the ancients fugitive on the mountainside and bright and quick in the dry path of the storm channels and shaping out the sockets in the rock and

hurrying from ledge to ledge down the slope shimmering and deft as eels. (203-204)

This sentence is a moment of “or” because in its breathless urgency, it presents various bizarre filters through which to view one moment in time. The initial filter we are given is, “animals dropping silently as martyrs.” Since a martyr is a person who willingly dies for their religion, this simile imbues the demise of these animals with religious significance, and also calls into question the supposed elevated worth of a person dying for their religion over any other living being’s death. In addition to a religious filter, this sentence presents a magical filter in which the spilling of the mercury is imagined as the “imbreachment of some ultimate alchemic work,” and an allusion to some mysterious type of communication with other beings, through “small trembling satellites” of looming mercury globules.

Yet another way to read this passage is for the beauty of the language itself. The spilled mercury transforms into “the fleeing stag of the ancients...shimmering and deft as eels.” Similar to the description of “polyps blueely wet,” this image is dazzling and also complicated by the prerequisite of violence. This lengthy sentence is an explosion of potential “or” that continuously adds to and changes the scene being described, creating various possible images of the moment. All of the clips from this long sentence provide different ways of viewing the scene separately, as if through different filters, and also as connected images. The strangeness of these so-called “filters” makes strange our own reaction to the moment and forces us to reflect upon our own reaction to the initial act of falling mules not as the known truth, but as one of many ways of knowing.

## A Legion of Horribles

The next moment of “or” I will analyze is the surprise attack of the Comanche, otherwise known as, “A legion of horrors,” on Captain White’s men. Captain White is a leader of a rogue army group, of which the kid is briefly a member, attempting to “reclaim” land from Mexico. Like the “martyr mules” and “polyps bluey wet” passages, this moment of “or” originates from violence. Unlike those two passages, this one does not transition toward an alternate, sublime sphere, but instead emphasizes explicitly the reality of the moment. It facilitates a sense of “or” through an overwhelming cascade of simultaneous details that are often starkly real and sometimes tinged with a surreal quality. The “or” in the body of this passage is signaled not so much by the content of the similes, but by the quantity. Even when replaced by an “and,” the structure of the “or” continues to function at a metaphorical level. The following excerpt demonstrates the unceasingly real quality of this multiple pages long moment of “or”:

A legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked **or** clad in costumes attic **or** biblical **or** wardrobe out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeon-tailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses’ ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse’s whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen’s faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than

the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (54-55, my emphasis)

Rather than providing continuously more surreal filters through which to view this moment of “or,” like the “polyps bluely wet,” and “martyr mules” passages, this moment emphasizes the onslaught of extremely detailed and real description. The quality of the “or” here does not launch us into a sublime sphere but rather grounds us in reality with the implication of myriad preceding acts of violence that have led to the diverse attire of this “legion of horrors.” One piece of clothing that stands out in particular is that of a “bloodstained weddingveil,” which yokes the typically happy image of a marriage ceremony to the terrifying image of bloodshed. Even toward the end of this passage, when three similes are used to describe the Comanche as “clowns,” who are riding “like a horde from hell” and who appear “like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing,” the similes still emphasize the horror of the moment at hand, rather than transcending it.

Interspersed within the “Legion of horrors” passage are religious references that contribute to the weight of “or.” The violence of the Comanche against Captain White’s men begins with the colloquial religious phrase: “Oh my God.” The religious connection continues after the Comanche attack begins as, “A man near [the kid sits] with an arrow hanging out of his neck... bent slightly as if in prayer” (55). So far, both of these allusions are darkly ironic because the following attack seems quite absent of God’s intervention, and because the man who appears to be praying for his life is already dead. As the incredibly long passage describing the attack continues, religious allusions subside until the close of the passage. Once the Comanche have accomplished

their slaughter of Captain White and his men, the narrator describes the aftermath as follows:

Dust stanch'd the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (57)

This simile may not seem like as much of a moment of “or” as previous passages because the image of “maimed and naked monks” is as violent and grotesque as the image being described. This simile carries its weight of “or” in the fact that it imposes additional and different violence upon the reader. Now, besides having to read a tremendously long passage detailing minutely the slaughter and scalping of these men, we are also called to imagine another circumstance in which monks have been stripped and tortured. This additional scene of violence is made more terrible by its religious import and the supposed purity and innocence of monks, as compared to Captain White’s men. The way in which the structure of the “or” continues to function in this passage on a metaphorical level, even as it is replaced by the words “like,” and “and,” is further demonstrated in the passage detailing the disappearance of the kid.

### **Disappearance of the man**

Many years after the gang has disbanded, the kid, now referred to as “the man,” encounters the judge in a bar. After speaking with the judge, the man goes into the outhouse and is followed inside by the judge. After this moment, the man disappears from the narrative and is strongly implied to be murdered by the judge. This disappearance of the man from the narrative demonstrates a different sort of moment of “or,” in which rather than offering various bizarre ways to view the occurrence, the

narrator seems to momentarily disappear along with the kid. The “or” then becomes textually absent, and is metaphorically present in the strange vacuum that is left. This passage neither provides us with myriad bizarre filters nor an onslaught of explicit details, which are two methods of “or” we have seen thus far. All we have are the sparse words and actions of onlookers:

Is someone in [the outhouse]? The first man said.

The man who was relieving himself did not look up. I wouldn’t go in there if I was you, he said.

Is there somebody in there?

I wouldn’t go in.

He hitched himself up and buttoned his trousers and stepped past them and went up the walk toward the lights. The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes.

Good God almighty, he said.

What is it?

He didn’t answer. He stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in. (348).

This is the last we hear of this scene because the next sentence transitions back to the judge dancing in the bar. None of the questions asked are answered, quite literally creating a space of “unknowing.” Another way this passage can be seen as a moment of “or” is that the character who has most seemed like a protagonist throughout the narrative disappears before the conclusion. This then raises the question: “Who or what is the true focus of this tale?” Even though the experience of reading the novel is detached and strange from the beginning, the way in which the narrative follows the kid on a journey still resembles the classic tale of a quest. Subconsciously, the reader has expected the kid to have some sort of last say, whether it be one of victory or defeat. Rather than signaling the judge as the only voice of authority in the text, the

disappearance of the man before the conclusion reveals to us, yet again, an assumption we did not realize we held, and expands our mental space of “unknowing” beyond where it has been for the rest of the novel. While some critics read the disappearance of the kid as his defeat, the only defeat that occurs is our own expectation of how the novel ends.

### **Final Thoughts**

Clearly, as demonstrated through the range of similes both short and long throughout the text and the various ways in which the weight of “or” manifests, *Blood Meridian* does not only present violence in one way, nor does it encourage an exclusive mode of understanding and experiencing the violence. Instead, it presents multiple possibilities through the portal of “or” which allows these moments to be at once repulsive and compelling; horrific and aesthetic; unethical and ethical. The conjunction “or” that is present in the title and either present or implied throughout the text validates multiple points of view and ways of knowing, and challenges the ways we have been conditioned to react to violence in different contexts. Even when the word “or” is not literally present, the structure of the “or” continues to operate at the level of metaphor as the text offers multiple possibilities for viewing violence.



## Chapter 2: Structures of “Or” Beyond the Narrative

The “or” does not exclusively function at the level of moments within the story; it also manifests at the level of structures of “or” beyond the narrative. These structures include: the relationship between the reader and the narrator, the ambiguity of sentence and dialogue form, the role(s) of the judge, the organization tools of epigraph, epilogue, and chapter headings, and the descriptions of landscape. By being present at the structural level as well as within the story, the weight of “or” promotes a state of “unknowing” unceasingly throughout the narrative of *Blood Meridian*.

### Reader as Witness

From the start, *Blood Meridian* invites us to witness from a space of “unknowing” through the neutral voice of the narrator. The opening sentence, “See the child,” does not force upon the reader empathy, compassion, condemnation, or judgment (1). It does not describe someone else seeing a child, or dictate how the reader should feel; it compels us to fill the space created with our own reactions and emotions. The voice of the narrator is most distinct for this omission of judgment. The ex-priest Tobin articulates the experience of reading this strangely objective voice of the narrator when he tells the kid that “No man is give leave of that voice [of the almighty],” to which the kid replies, “I aint heard no voice.” Tobin then asserts, “When it stops...you’ll know you’ve heard it all your life” (130). The lack of judgment from the narrator of *Blood Meridian* makes apparent the otherwise hidden inherent judgment of any sort of writing that claims insight into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of

other people. This neutral voice of the narrator persists throughout the entire narrative, creating a constant state of “unknowing.”

One critic of *Blood Meridian*, Lydia Cooper, describes McCarthy’s narrative style as having an “objective, omniscient narrator so tonally distant and removed that readers feel as if they were watching the fictional events from the wrong end of a telescopic lens” (3). Cooper’s language here is particularly apt. Aside from the way the narrative technique creates a strange distance between the reader and the minds of the characters, it also creates the inverted sense that the book is somehow watching for the reactions of the reader, or rather that we are meant to reflect upon and observe our own thoughts as we read. The reader’s reactions are essential to the telling of the story, since the reactions and motivations of the characters are absent. This sense of the reader being an active witness of the novel is constantly implicit in the text due to the neutrality of the narrator, and at times, the reader’s role is even made explicit within the telling of the story.

In the narrative, specific instances evoking the concept of the witness provide even more framework with which to consider the reader’s role in reading *Blood Meridian*. One of these moments occurs when in their journey across the desert, Glanton’s gang stumbles upon the wreckage of a half-burned carriage, filled with dead and mutilated bodies. The text provides multiple ways to understand this scene, including the ex-priest Tobin’s assertion that it shows “the hand of a cynical god conducting...so lethal a congruence;” the narrator’s suggestion that it “might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance;” and the judge’s assertion “that in this

was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime” (159).

This provision of three different interpretations of this desert wreckage is another moment of “or” that encourages “unknowing.” As articulated in the definition of “unknowing,” none of these ways of knowing is the primary or correct one, however, for the purposes thinking about the reader as witness, the judge’s interpretation is particularly of interest. While the role of witness may seem passive or innocent, the judge’s comment implies that it is an active role. The judge’s assertion that the witness is the prime thing further supports the importance of the reader’s reactions to *Blood Meridian*. After asserting the primacy of the witness, the judge asks, “[W]hat could be said to occur unobserved?” (159). This question seems to implicate the reader in the horrors of *Blood Meridian*, almost as if accusing us of making it real through our reading. While this is certainly one way to consider the role of witness, we are also constantly spurred to witness our own minds, which gives us the opportunity and power to rest in the non-violent sphere of “unknowing.”

### **Ambiguity of Sentence Form**

The ambiguity of sentence form in *Blood Meridian* contributes to the neutrality of the narrator and the reader’s role as witness. One way this ambiguity is cultivated is through the narrator’s signature lack of explanation of descriptions. When describing the beginning of the kid’s journey, the narrator says:

[The kid] wanders east as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon that flat and pastoral landscape. Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden. Against the sun’s declining figures moving in the slower dusk

across a paper skyline. A lone dark husbandman pursuing mule and harrow down the rain blown bottomland toward night. (4)

Each of these sentences feels like the verbal equivalent of a snapshot with no caption, or a photo torn in half, or a caption with no photo. They give us partial information, but only enough to evoke some imagery while also creating the mysterious sense that we cannot possibly understand all that is referenced, like the “shadowed agony in the garden,” for example. Even though the narrator does not reveal all explanation to the reader, the narrator still has a voice of authority and omniscience. Statements such as, “At fourteen [the kid] runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark,” signal the narrator’s authority and ability to see not only into the past, but also the future (4). The incompleteness of the narrator’s description, in conjunction with the narrator’s omniscient authority, structurally upholds the space of “unknowing” cultivated throughout the entire novel, and thus can be seen as a narrative structure of “or.”

Another structure of “or” functioning at the level of sentence form is the sparse use of punctuation throughout all of the narrative, especially in the dialogue. Specifically, the lack of quotation marks in *Blood Meridian* muddles the distinction between who is speaking and who is being spoken to, creating the potential for discordant interpretations of dialogue. This uncertainty also requires participation of the reader, who must either choose to hover in a space of “unknowing,” or to make a decision themselves about who is saying what, potentially eliminating valid possibilities for how to read the moment.

One particularly unclear moment of dialogue occurs when Glanton shoots an elderly and defenseless woman whom the gang has found, exemplifying how lack of

punctuation in dialogue functions as an “or” in *Blood Meridian*. After the gang reveals the woman to Glanton, he unsheathes his pistol. Before any more action transpires, someone says, “Watch yourself there,” followed by several of the men stepping back (103). This remark could be directed to Glanton from his men; to the woman from Glanton; to the men from Glanton; or to the reader from the narrator. Because of the lack, not only of quotation marks, but also of framing language around who is speaking, the source of the command to “watch yourself” is so unclear that it compels the reader to pause and contemplate its possible meanings. Glanton proceeds to fire a bullet into the woman’s skull, the gory aftermath of which is described in detail by the narrator. The lack of quotation marks, along with the word “yourself” in the dialogue preceding this act of violence, creates the sense that the narrator is commanding us to witness our own reactions to this crime as we read.

The lack of narrative explanation of descriptive details, the sparse nature of punctuation, and the opaqueness of dialogue in *Blood Meridian* are all structural manifestations of the “or” that suspend the reader in a space of “unknowing” for the duration of the novel. While the word “lack” typically has a negative connotation, the lack of description and of punctuation in the style of *Blood Meridian*’s narration releases the reader from the grips of knowing, and creates space for the beauty of “unknowing” to flourish. Ironically, the lack of these two details actually creates an abundance of interpretive possibilities, whereas the presence of punctuation and description, devices of knowing, would limit these possibilities. These apparent deficits serve to make the reader aware of the incomplete information being presented. All texts are inherently incomplete, but often present themselves with a dangerous authority that

seems to know the truth. The way *Blood Meridian* calls attention to its own incompleteness through mysterious descriptions and unclear punctuation are primary structures of “or” in the novel.

### **Role(s) of the Judge**

While his name may suggest that he belongs in a court of law, the judge represents seemingly limitless and often contradictory roles throughout *Blood Meridian*. He is “like an enormous infant” and he also seems strangely old, due to his extensive knowledge (348). At times the judge is a messiah figure, like when he rescues Glanton’s gang. At other instances he is more like a demon, such as when he decides to kill the remainder of Glanton’s gang toward the end of the novel. The narrator often compares the judge to a preacher or priest, yet his first act of the novel is to incite a mob attack on an innocent man with his purposeful lies. His articulate vocabulary and references to high literature make the judge seem like the most learned scholar, and he also has the handy skills of a craftsman, which instills two stereotypically oppositional roles in one character. The ex-priest Tobin says the judge is “a hand at anything. I’ve never seen him turn to a task but what he didn’t prove clever at it” (129). This list of contradictory roles and functions of the judge could go on forever, but the most relevant contradiction is his simultaneous lack of humanity and high projected sense of intellectual capacity. Functioning like the other components of “or” in the text, the judge conjoins and confuses categories that are often considered separate, like knowledge and violence. The resistance of the judge to fit into any one identity makes him a structure of “unknowing” in the novel, while on the other hand the coexistence of

the potential for horrible acts of violence and of tremendous knowledge serves as a constant warning of the potential harm of knowing.

### **Epigraph Form**

Epigraphs of any text give the reader a sense of the tale they are about to begin, and also serve as a point to return to throughout the work. The epigraph is a touchstone that never changes in content, but that the reader constantly changes their perception and understanding of as they continue to read. Epigraphs can serve various functions, including but not limited to: connecting the work to a larger context, summarizing essential points of the work, or providing helpful background information. There is no clear reason why McCarthy chose the particular epigraphs he did to preface *Blood Meridian*, which only adds to the overarching sense of “unknowing.”

The three epigraphs at the beginning of *Blood Meridian* originate from the diverse sources of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French poet and philosopher, Paul Valéry; the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic, Jacob Boehme; and the uncited author of a 1982 article from “The Yuma Daily Sun.” These sources differ in terms of the time and location of their publication, as well as in their authorial perspective, but they share the unifying topic of the dark side of human nature. They each employ a vocabulary of violence and darkness: Valéry uses the words “cruelty” and “blood,” Boehme’s asserts that “death and dying are the very life of darkness,” and the Yuma Daily Sun reports that a skull shows “evidence of having been scalped.” These epigraphs also have in common as sort of ethical or moral ambiguity that hints at darkness and violence, but making no apparent judgment. The fact that there are three rather than just one epigraph provides

different touchstones and creates even more space for different interpretations of the novel, thus functioning as a structural component of the novel's "or" factor.

### **Chapter Summaries**

While the convention of chapter summaries serves as an organizing and clarifying mechanism in some novels, in *Blood Meridian* it adds yet another layer of "or" to the experience of reading. Beginning each chapter in *Blood Meridian* is a roman numeral (starting with I and going to XXIII) followed by a summary of the events occurring therein, listed like cryptic scene titles. Similar to the epigraphs, the chapter summaries not only precede each chapter, but also work as a touchstone for the reader once they have completed the chapter. The summaries are not explicit enough to give a clear idea of the chapter's occurrences before they are read, but as a post-chapter touchstone the summaries seem at first like clues about how to gauge the importance of different characters and events. The summaries are so disparate and inconsistent, however, that rather than contributing to order, they further complicate the experience of reading the novel.

At times these scene titles provide additional information, like the title in the Chapter Four summary that says, "Attacked by Comanches" (44). Nowhere else is it explicitly mentioned who attacks Captain White's men, as evidenced by the question someone asks in Chapter Five without getting an answer: "What kind of indians was them?" (59). At times these scene titles highlight certain people, places, or actions. The Chapter Two summary even has a scene entitled, "their kindness," referring to the actions of a band of travelers the kid meets that feeds him generously (16). Sometimes the obscure scene titles reference metaphors as if they are equally significant to every



other part of the novel. One instance of citing metaphor in the pre-chapter summary occurs in Chapter Four, which has the scene title, “On alien ground,” referencing the metaphor comparing Glanton’s men to alien pilgrims on the planet Anareta (44). In addition to emphasizing different aspects of the text, the scene titles also appear in different languages, including Old French, Latin, and Spanish. The way the chapter summaries in *Blood Meridian* highlight different sorts of details throughout the text ultimately add another layer of “or,” to the reading of this text that is already steeped in “unknowing.”

### **The Epilogue as Alternative**

Like every other Chapter in the novel, The Epilogue begins with a heading, but instead of a roman numeral it reads “EPILOGUE,” and instead of a summary, there is half a page of blank space. This space is significant. Rather than providing snap shots of the epilogue, it refuses to suggest which parts, if any, of the epilogue are notable. It is a printed version of “unknowing,” an ultimate moment of “or.” The scene described in the epilogue is the building of a fence by unnamed and unfamiliar people. Critics have interpreted the epilogue in many ways, including representing the start of civilization, the taming of the West, or a different kind of violence committed upon the landscape. I see within it a metaphor for the illusion of knowledge, or knowledge as “a validation of sequence and causality” (351). All of these interpretations, and more, are possible, but its very existence reflects a sort of ultimate “or.”

Following the seemingly omniscient and authoritative narrator’s assertion of “THE END,” the epilogue unsettles perhaps the only reliable and trustworthy component of the novel: the narrator. By providing an alternate ending to the already

obscure and ambiguous tale the narrator has told, *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue launches the reader into a sphere of "unknowing" that will last long after the book is closed.

### **Landscape as a Structure of "Or"**

Another kind of structure that upholds "unknowing" in *Blood Meridian* is the landscape. While there is much to say about the portrayal of landscape in the novel, since it sometimes seems to have more personality than the characters, the point I make is that it too functions as a structure of "or" within the novel. Even in the vocabulary used to describe the landscape is a discourse of "unknowing," as this excerpt demonstrates:

They set forth in a crimson dawn where sky and earth closed in a razorous plane. Out there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and scrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain, gravely canted and veering out through tinctures of rose and the dark beyond the dawn to the uttermost rebate of space. (52)

Words like "vast," "shoreless void," "uncertain," and "space" are all descriptors that relate to "unknowing." Landscape is also used to solidify the narrator's neutral voice philosophy. Similar to how the narrator's description of people's actions is untainted by judgment, not one aspect of the landscape seems to be more important or beautiful than another:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence...here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become enshadowed with unguessed kinships. (McCarthy, 244)

This is an appropriate passage to use in concluding this chapter, for it seems that all of the structures of "or" functioning beyond the narrative level of *Blood Meridian* are

imbued with a “strange equality.” The way in which the narrator speaks with omniscient authority also provides incomplete information that puts the reader in the role of a witness. As a witness, we not only pause in a space of “unknowing” when it comes to passing judgment on characters and events within the novel, we also pause and reflect upon our own thought processes. The “strange equality” of the “or” is further upheld by the ambiguity of the narrator’s explanation of details and of dialogue. The structural components of “or” extend from before the story in the epigraphs, to the varied style of the Chapter summaries, and to the beyond the narrative to the ultimate “or” of the novel’s epilogue. In conjunction with the specific narrative moments of “or” within the text, these structural components of it make for a novel that not only suggests “unknowing” as a way of being, but embodies it.

### **Chapter 3: Ethical Implications of “Or”**

The violence of *Blood Meridian* is imposed not only upon characters within the narrative, but also upon the reader. This imposition compels us to grapple with complex questions, such as: How can we, as readers, understand our own experience of this violence and our role in relation to it? Is it not possible to cultivate a sense of “unknowing” without violence? How should we feel when reading this novel; guilty for even enjoying it? Each of these inquiries hinges upon our ethical understanding of the relationship between ourselves and *Blood Meridian*, and the ethical implications of representing violence in literature. There are various ways that the space of “unknowing,” signaled by the conjunction “or,” provides possible explanations for these lingering questions, some of which relate to violence as an alternative to history, violence as a spur for ethical awakening, and written violence as a metaphor for the violence of discourse. These varied explanations for *Blood Meridian*’s violence lead to a complex set of possible reader experiences and responses to a novel that, despite its inarguable darkness and violence, still maintains hope for an ethical reading of the text.

#### **Violence as an Alternate History**

The first and simplest explanation for *Blood Meridian*’s violence is that it provides an alternative story to the one told repeatedly throughout history. The violence in the novel is an “or,” a different version of history than the white-washed, heroic telling of western expansion that has been propagated through various popular media. One McCarthy critic, Mark Eaton, supports this concept by claiming that the re-creation of this forgotten violence in *Blood Meridian* takes on “the important task of

remembering the dismembered bodies of those who died in the struggle for survival and territory in the US borderlands” (159). The novel’s violence can thus be seen as a necessary step in the task of representing historical people and events that have been forgotten. While Eaton’s answer to *Blood Meridian*’s violence is well-founded, alone it does not suffice. Eaton’s assertion does not answer why the violence feels so detached, or why McCarthy does not emphasize this alternative story by praising historically marginalized people and demonizing the historical heroes. In fact, Eaton’s reasoning leads him to conclude that *Blood Meridian* “ought to be read alongside other historical and fictional works as part of an important recovery operation in American culture,” and that “[r]emembering the dead becomes, then, a way of coming to terms with how the West was won” (162, 165). My own reading of *Blood Meridian* requires no external texts and certainly does not lead to a “coming to terms,” but rather to a disruption of them.

This disruption of the reader’s expectations of violence provides not just an alternate story, but an alternate experience of thinking about how the “West was won.” If the only purpose of the violence was to “remember disremembered bodies,” character interiority would have helped this goal and McCarthy would have provided more of it, however, McCarthy’s writing purposefully veers away from revealing character intentions. Every character seems to have the potential to harm and the potential to help. Even the judge shows both of these tendencies when he adopts and cares for a Mexican boy, only to eventually kill and scalp him. What the tale of *Blood Meridian* criticizes more than historical people and events, then, is the potential for violence in human nature. Violence becomes strangely abstract and removed from human motivation since

we are not privy to the human wills that initiate it. One McCarthy critic, Ronja Vieth, interprets the strange detached quality of the violence in *Blood Meridian* as gothic in style, asserting that this gothic version of western expansion “needs to be retold as a counter narrative to allow for a healthy equilibrium of human and literary experience”(57). Though Vieth’s point is similar to Eaton’s in that they both interpret *Blood Meridian* as balancing out historical inequities, she includes the bizarre style in which the violence is portrayed as part of this counter narrative, rather than accusing it of needing to be supplemented.

### **Violence as Ethical Awakening**

Though it may initially seem counterintuitive, applying the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas to the violence of *Blood Meridian* builds upon the idea that the detached style of the violence contributes to an ethical reading of the text. The weight of “or” in *Blood Meridian* is so inclusive that even the philosophy of Lévinas, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher who considers ethics to be an inherent and non-violent responsibility for the Other, is at times valid. Lévinas criticizes art for being a space “where events other than that of the presentation of the original being come to overwhelm or sublimate the pure sincerity of this presentation” (202). The sort of literature that Lévinas critiques in this statement is the art that distracts, entertains, and placates us, giving us the happy-ending feeling that all is right with the world; or, transporting us to a fantasy world that allows us to forget our real life responsibilities. *Blood Meridian* does anything but placate, however, and it would be an understatement to say it does not provide the ideal escapist fantasy. Rather than putting us to sleep,

*Blood Meridian* wakes us up to our own responsibility in reading the text, and in the world.

It is ironic, or at the very least unexpected, for the work of Lévinas to be used in interpreting and analyzing *Blood Meridian* for many reasons, one of which is for the apparent clash between *Blood Meridian*'s omnipresent violence, and Lévinas' assertion that the human face "is what forbids us to kill" (*Totality*, 52). Nonetheless, even Lévinas' philosophy of the face has its resonance in the text of *Blood Meridian*. In Chapter Two under the "Ambiguity of Sentence Form" section, I use the passage in which Glanton kills a defenseless old woman to demonstrate how the ambiguity of dialogue fosters "unknowing" through multiple possibilities. After someone says, "Watch yourself there," narrator relays the aftermath of this woman's death in such a way that points to the responsibility of the reader to her, and supports Lévinas' claim that the face dissuades acts of violence:

The woman looked up. Neither courage nor heartsink in those old eyes.  
[Glanton] pointed with his left hand and she turned to follow his hand  
with her gaze and he put the pistol to her head and fired. (102-103)

This sentence embodies Lévinas' concept of the face. According to Lévinas, "The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (*Totality*, 57). Lévinas proposes that being face to face with another person evokes our responsibility for that person. He distinguishes, however, that as soon as we begin to notice, or "know," finite details such as the color of one's eyes or hair, we have begun to fail our responsibility of the other by attempting to "know" what cannot possibly be known. It is in this attempting to know the face that it seems to "invite us to an act of violence." The gang's acquisition of people's scalps is a

literal manifestation of this concept. When Glanton sees the woman, he mostly looks past her humanity to the potential receipt on her head. The reason he only “mostly” discredits her humanity because Glanton first directs the woman’s gaze away from him with the point of his finger before killing her.

Glanton’s gesture of pointing the woman’s gaze away demonstrates the duality of the face in how it simultaneously invites and forbids violence. His gesture can be read as an acknowledgment of the woman’s humanity and of the aspect of the human face that forbids others to do violence to it. As the passage continues, the focus shifts away from Glanton’s involvement, to the reader’s:

The explosion filled all that sad little park. Some of the horses shied and stepped. A fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman’s head in a great vomit of gore and she pitched over and lay slain in her blood without remedy. (103)

This passage implicates the reader as a collaborator in the violence, verifying the judge’s claim that the witness is primary. By saying, “[Glanton] put the pistol to her head and fired,” the narrator effectively communicates the death of this woman. Rather than moving forward, however, the narrator underscores repeatedly just how dead this woman is. After she is shot through the head by Glanton, she pitches over, which emphasizes her death even more, and then the narrator continues to dwell on her death in almost ludicrous fashion by describing the woman as not only “slain,” but slain “without remedy.” The overt redundancy of this innocent woman’s death seems to force the reader into awareness of what they are reading, and the description of the hole in this woman’s head as “fistsized” lends a sense of participation in the violence to the reader. This particular description compels the reader to envision sticking their own hand into the head of this now-dead woman. The narrator’s obsessive attention to this



woman's death certainly does not transport the reader to a mystical fantasy realm, as Lévinas critiques some art for doing. It forces the reader to metaphorically get their hands dirty, to face the irreversibility of death, and to contemplate their own role in the violence as a witness of the novel.

### **The Mindless Violence of Discourse**

One explanation for the persistent violent imagery in *Blood Meridian* is that it serves as a metaphor for the violence of discourse. When unknowing is not practiced and moments of “or” are forgotten, relevant truths are excluded, such as the forgotten half of the title: *The Evening Redness in the West*. When the second half of the title is left off, as it usually is, the novel becomes easy to typecast as violent and horrific. The inclusion of the whole title suspends the usual sense of mutually exclusive qualities of violent and beautiful, nuancing both terms. The way in which half of the title of this novel has been decapitated by much of the literary community reflects the way in which certain historical truths are muffled when other truths are recorded. The writing of history then necessarily becomes an act of violence that privileges certain voices over others. The weight of “or” in *Blood Meridian* presents the leaving of the space of “unknowing” as an act of violence in and of itself.

The act of witnessing necessitates the post-witnessing choice of either representing others, or staying silent. Neither of these actions is ideal since we cannot possibly capture the whole truth of others, but in not representing them we commit the violence of erasure. One moment in the narrative that plays out this dilemma is when a member of the gang, Webster, is disturbed by the judge's drawing of him and asks him to stop. The judge smiles, and says “Whether in my book or not, every man is

tabernacle in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world” (147). In other words, the judge asserts that every act of witnessing is necessarily followed by the post-witness act of choosing what to do with the information. One instance in the narrative that comments on the erasure of post-witnessing silence occurs right after the “polyps blueely wet” passage.

After this passage, the narrator makes the following prophecy about the slaughter that has taken place:

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (182)

The narrator’s prophecy is, in one way, immediately proved false because we have just read the scribed description of these people’s demise. The prophecy has a deeper commentary, however, on how too often events such as this do go unreported, and are thereby “erased.” By relaying so much violence, *Blood Meridian* acknowledges the many people whose stories have been silenced, and provides a symbolic re-creation of their suffering that brings their stories back into a critical discourse. Ironically, the sense of “unknowing” created through this violence offers the reader a way out of participating in the violence of discourse. Only by checking our reactions to information presented and pausing to consider multiple points of view can we prevent our own addition to the violence.

## Reading the kid as Possibly Redemptive

Even though the kid demonstrates the potential for “mindless violence” from the start of *Blood Meridian*, and disappears before the end, it is still possible to read his character as redemptive. Vieth agrees with this claim, saying, “The kid’s open resistance to give in to complete evil persists throughout the narrative, suggesting not only a Gothic duality within humans but also hope for redemption” (Vieth, 51). While the kid does engage in acts of violence toward the beginning of the novel, his involvement becomes less obvious as the novel goes on, and toward the end he repeatedly resists participating in violence. One of the earliest signs of the kid’s resistance to violence is when he removes an arrow from the leg of an acquaintance, even at the discouragement of the rest of the gang (162). After a few more similar instances in which the kid helps others, he directly resists the temptation of violence by refusing to kill the judge even though the ex-priest Tobin continually urges him to do so (285). Beyond resisting violence, the kid also attempts to prevent it when he thinks he sees a stranded old woman in need of assistance. It turns out that the woman is dead. Before the kid realizes the woman is dead, the narrator gives the following account of his actions toward her:

[The kid] spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her country people who would welcome her and that she could join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (328)

This is by far the most revealing passage in the entire text about the kid’s interiority.

Both the “low voice” in which he speaks to this woman and the story he tells her of his

background signal that the kid empathizes with what he perceives to be this woman's plight and that he wants to make her feel safe. His already implicit intention for this woman's wellbeing is made explicit when he says he will "convey her to a safe place." The reason that the kid gives for needing to escort this woman, that "she would surely die" if he left her, signals that the kid now lives by some sort of ethical code that is more elevated than what he had at the beginning of his journey. Though the story of the kid's life is full of violence and darkness, and the woman whom he tries to save is dead, his intentions in this moment nonetheless reveal at least the possibility of converting the potential for mindless violence into a sense of responsibility for other human beings.

### **The Judge's Articulation of "Unknowing"**

Ironically, the judge does not only contribute to violence through discourse, like when he erases cave drawing or draws Webster against his will, he is also the most eloquent articulator of "unknowing" in the novel. Mixed in amongst his nihilistic remarks and claims that "war is god (261)" the judge has a few key moments that beautifully embody "unknowing, such as the following excerpt:

The truth about the world, [the judge] said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddled field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (256)

Here, the judge espouses a belief that contradicts his later claim that "there is no mystery" (263). He asserts that "anything is possible" and that the end of the world is not comprehensible. The way McCarthy writes this novel bleeds strangeness back into the world. As demonstrated in previous sections, the detached quality of the narrator

and emotionally-absent portrayal of violence alienates us from the world of *Blood*

*Meridian*. The judge elaborates on his theory of “unknowing” when he says:

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (256)

Not only does “unknowing” manifest in moments and structures of “or” all throughout *Blood Meridian*, it is also preached by the very character who acts as an antagonist to it. The judge’s articulation of “unknowing,” his assertion that “no man’s mind can compass” the order of existence, undoes his claim at the end of the novel that he will live forever, for how could he know? While the judge clearly represents some malevolent and long lasting force, his acknowledgment of the mystery of the world and the impossibility of knowing everything provides hope that his other more nihilistic views are not entirely true.

### **Reader Experience of the Violence**

Given the complex and varied explanations for the violence in *Blood Meridian*, there are myriad ways we can understand our experience of it as readers. We can view the violence as an alternate story to history, as a means of inspiring ethical reflection, or as a way to represent the violence of discourse. At times we may feel guilty, as if in witnessing we are somehow responsible for the violence. At other moments we may feel that in our witnessing we somehow contribute to a balancing out of historical wrongs. There is no one way we are meant to respond to or understand the violence in this novel, and the suggestions I have made are some of many possibilities. The

numerous and discordant ways *Blood Meridian* allows us to experience the violence within, helps us remain in a space of “unknowing.” It turns our questioning inside out so that instead of asking how ethical *Blood Meridian* is, we start to wonder if we are being an ethical reader as we witness the words on the page.

## Conclusion

*Blood Meridian* challenges our desire to know and encourages us to suspend our beliefs and assumptions in a space of “unknowing.” In this thesis I have attempted not only to argue for the presence of moments and structures of “or,” and spaces of “unknowing” within *Blood Meridian*, but also to embody these concepts within my own writing. The balancing act of crafting a paper that strives on the one hand to be academic, and on the other hand to argue against the act of “knowing” has been challenging and rewarding. Toward the beginning of the kid’s journey, a hermit tells him, “A man’s at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with” (20). I agree with the hermit and have experienced in the process of writing this thesis the struggle of being able to see my own biases. While I feel I have made it to the end of this tightrope of a thesis standing upright, I am also aware that there are no doubt moments throughout my argument that I lean in one direction more than another.

Just as *Blood Meridian* calls attention to its own incompleteness through specific moments of “or,” structural ambiguities beyond the narrative, and unclear ethical implications, I hope to explicitly acknowledge the inherent incompleteness of my own interpretation and analysis of the novel. While I make the argument that *Blood Meridian* can stand on its own without supplementary reading, this thesis is meant to be read as a contribution to the discourse on *Blood Meridian* that already exists. I have pulled from my own knowledge and experience not to argue that my perspectives are right, but to offer new ways of reading the text that differ from the often made claims that *Blood Meridian* is nihilistic, or its violence is excessive, or the judge “wins” and the kid “loses.”

Rather than casting these latter views as wrong, I hope that the addition of my voice to this discourse will serve to expand the space of “unknowing” in the discussion around *Blood Meridian*, and to open up people’s minds to the new and exciting possibilities of approaching learning from this space.



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